

Voices
from the
GapsKleya
Forté-Escamilla

“

Do not be afraid. At the end, words return to nothing, as they are before they are spoken. The mountain held Grandmother with its wings but her feet touched the ground where Maggie stood. She saw this ground was a sacred place and many Beings were here together and shouted with the keening of hawks. Their voices rose and swept everything away. Tall buildings of brick and glass shimmered and faded like burning cellophane. English words, Spanish words were bodiless echoes. Silver conchos lighted plastic pink and blue and yellow. They fell to nothing without a sound, without raising a speck of dust. She could cease to mourn. She could stop running. She could understand.

— Daughter of the Mountain

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**Quick Facts**

- * Born in 1941
- * Writes about many marginalized groups: teens, lesbians, and multiethnic people
- * Also writes under the name Edna Escamill

This page was researched and submitted by Emi A. Neubauer and Melissa Parker on 5/23/01

Biography

Kleya Forté-Escamilla (born Edna Blanche Escamilla) was born in Calexico, California on October 1, 1941. She grew up in Southwestern Arizona, and Baja California. She is of mixed ancestry. She is of Peruvian, Mexican and Western European descent. She has written under the names Edna Escamill and Kleya Forté-Escamilla. She has a son named Eden.



Kleya Forté-Escamilla

Biography continued

Forté-Escamilla holds two Bachelor of Arts degrees: one in Art, the other in French Philosophy. She also holds a Master's degree in Creative Writing. Her works include three novels, *Daughter of the Mountain* (written under the name Edna Escamill), *Mada: An Erotic Novel*, and *The Storyteller with Nike Airs and Other Barrio Stories*, which is a book of short stories. Her work has also appeared in *Join In: Multiethnic Short Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults*, edited by Donald R. Gallo (et. al), which is a collection of short stories addressing the problems and themes that contemporary teens of different ethnic backgrounds face. Her work has appeared in several anthologies for fiction as well as in journals.

Forté-Escamilla's works encompass the themes of coming to terms with, and embracing multiculturalism, perhaps in direct response to her own life. Many of her short stories explore issues of self-acceptance and coming to terms with being "different." Forté-Escamilla weaves English with Spanish, the present with the past, oral tradition with the written word, to speak to the reader on a deeply spiritual basis. Her work speaks to marginalized groups on many levels; being a teen, multi-racial, a lesbian, and a woman. All of these groups have issues that present their own separate identities and are interwoven within Forté-Escamilla's texts with rich description and compassion; leaving the reader to identify deeply with the characters she so vividly presents. Forté-Escamilla received the Astraea Foundation Award in 1993 for excellence in writing dedicated to Lesbian and Gay literature.

Daughter of the Mountain (1991) is Forté-Escamilla's first novel. It was written under the name Edna Escamill, which is a derivative of her birth name, Edna Escamilla. The novel takes place in El Pueblo, a small border town in the Arizona desert. The action centers on Maggie and Balestine (Bale) two adolescents who become friends in the midst of their economic and racial obstacles. Gringos (Whites) are overrunning the small mountainous town where they live threatening the characters' sense of belonging and identity. The book has narratives (cuentos) spoken from the perspective of Maggie's grandmother, Adela Sewa; which are written in both Spanish and English. These narratives teach Maggie how to identify with her innate spirituality and to identify with the ways of the land in order for her survival.



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Adela's narratives reach deep within history, some going as far back into the past as the nineteenth century; remembering the old ways of life long since forgotten. These cuentos provide comfort and hope to a dislocated people in search of unity. The author Tillie Olsen comments on *Daughter of the Mountain* on the back book cover. Olsen speaks of the book's profound ability to articulate the past, present and future within the text. She says, "it is one of the great books of 'place' - poor town, desert, mountain-recreated so vividly." She goes on to comment on the book's ability to speak to marginalized groups, using "class, color and circumstances" that normally would work against a person, in an uplifting and inspiring manner.

"Out of what must have been the most profound depths of love, anguish, response to beauty, desperation to understand, to make understood, Edna Escamilla has slowly, cumulatively wrought a landmark book that will stand beyond its decade." -Tillie Olsen (from back book cover)

Olsen's comment speaks beyond *Daughter of the Mountain*. Forté-Escamilla incorporates the themes of "place" beyond the physical existence of the characters she writes about. Forté-Escamilla gives rich accounts of both homeland and America, in rich narratives that speak to all people, Spanish or gringos, gay or straight, men or women. Her texts utilize the profound ability to use a specific marginalized group to speak to all people. Her lavishly crafted texts give a voice to those who would otherwise be ignored.

The Storyteller with Nike Airs and other Barrio Stories (1994) is Kleya Forté-Escamilla's 1994 collection of short stories. These works of fiction explore the lives of women living on the Mexican-American border and find their inspiration within the life of their author. Forté-Escamilla artfully combines English and Spanish narration as she colorfully constructs her barrio scenes. Her characters living in proximity to the Rio Grande face poverty, racism, sexual abuse and broken families. The author herself describes the stories within the collection as the voices that she hears in her waking dreams; she invites the reader to explore these dreams along with her, which are richly narrated and woven with native mysticism.



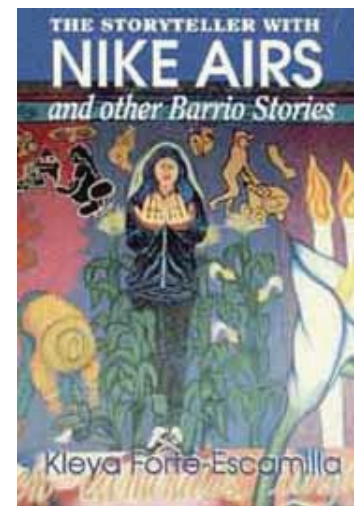
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In “The Pan Birote,” la Abuelita is a woman of pride and strength in the face of poverty. Leaving Sunday mass with two loaves of bread for her and her hungry grandchildren, the Abuelita is too proud to allow her family to eat the long-awaited bread in the streets. Her young grandsons, los dos jalapenos, do not yet have the same restraint and pride. They cannot quiet their hungry stomachs, and in the end, the grandmother selflessly sacrifices her share of the pan birote. She can neither bring herself to eat in the street nor tell the boys that they must wait any longer.

Trudi, the main character of “Come Rain or Come Shine,” is another example of the strong, self-sacrificing women of *The Storyteller with Nike Airs and other Barrio Stories*. Trudi is forced to abandon her dreams of escaping the barrio life and taking college classes due to her socio-economic standing. Even worse, she finds herself forced to have sex with a doctor on a weekly basis in order to earn money for her family and provide her sick siblings with the medications that they need to survive.

The women of these stories face incredible challenges, but are by no means powerless victims of their circumstances. They find strength within themselves and each other to conquer over poverty and misogyny. Often, the women of Forté-Escamilla’s border fiction find this strength in the arms of another woman. In the story “Black Orchid,” Forté-Escamilla explores the coming of age of a young lesbian in a machismo society.





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The following passage, from the short story “Old Lady Gin and the Magic Piano,” embodies the rhythmic style of the author as she switches narration from English to español, enriching the experience for the reader:

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By the time Lea walked back from la Veinte-Dos to her own Barrio, she had almost forgotten about the Campfire Girls. But she felt her heart hurting and she felt guilty about eating the maraschino cherries knowing she couldn't pay her dues. Those feeling extended behind her like a long snake trailing after her corazon and taking small bites out of it. When Lea got to Gin's store, around the block from her house, her corazon was the size of a frijol, and she was feeling pretty empty.

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Mada: An Erotic Novel (1994) incorporates the themes of multiculturalism and lesbianism within its text. The book centers on the narrator Raquel, and her association with a German woman, Mada von Brecht in San Francisco. Raquel is half Latino, as well as a lesbian, and the book explores fundamental ideas of marginalization and discrimination that face women who don't fit into the “mold.” Raquel is a teacher and travels between San Francisco, New York City, Minneapolis and Germany in the novel. In her travels, the reader is exposed to prejudices held against immigrants, as well as lesbians through the characters in the novel. The novel has plot twists, including accusations of prostitution and child pornography as well as bizarre love triangle intertwined with the complex relationship between Raquel and Mada, which goes beyond a mere sexual relationship.



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In the novel Raquel is torn between her unquestionable love for Mada, a common past acquaintance the women share, Midge, and Raquel's own search for personal identity and coming to grips with her lesbianism. Raquel's restless spirit inspires her travels, and her unsettlement in any one place shows her own personal dissatisfaction with her life, and the need to explore within herself to find the personal enrichment that the surface of a sexual relationship lacks.

“‘This is a friendly warning, sister. Because you’re a woman and a American,’ said White, all drawn again. ‘Stay away from the von Brecht woman.’ Meanwhile, Agent Rush was rifling through the pages of my large sketchbook. ‘Any dirty pictures in here?’ Agent White motioned with his head and Rush stopped, but his big round thumb remained pressing the cover. He saw my eyes go from his hand to his face, and something must have showed in my look because rage twisted in his mouth. ‘I wouldn’t waste my seed on you!’ he shouted, sounding like someone he’s seen in a movie and worked at remembering - the stance and the words. But his anger was very real; he wanted to break my neck for who I was” (83).

This excerpt shows the prevalent theme in the novel of the intolerance which faces Raquel as a lesbian, as well as the prejudices felt against Mada, both as a foreigner and a lesbian. The novel weaves the intricacies of the complex relationship of Mada and Raquel both on a personal, intimate level, as well as interpersonal relationships they share with others.



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Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

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